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College: Prof. not 'removed' for religion

By Lou Marano

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

WASHINGTON, Feb. 8 (UPI) -- An Ohio college has denied the charge that it has removed a part-time philosophy instructor from his courses because of his openly Catholic beliefs.

On Thursday FIRE -- the Foundation for Legal Rights in Education -- said Lakeland Community College, near Cleveland, had "removed" James Tuttle from his classes for refusing to hide his religious identity from students.

FIRE is a Philadelphia-based campus watchdog group founded in 1999 by University of Pennsylvania historian Alan Charles Kors and Boston civil rights attorney Harvey A. Silverglate.

FIRE said Tuttle's problems began in March 2003, when Arts and Humanities Dean James L. Brown forwarded a complaint from a student who said Tuttle mentioned his Roman Catholic beliefs too often for that student's taste and suggested that Tuttle be given "counseling for tolerance."

Tuttle confirmed to United Press International that he attempted to deal with the issue by informing students of his orientation in "disclaimers" to the syllabi of two of his classes. Tuttle said on April 21 he received a letter from Brown saying the dean was "more bothered by (Tuttle's) disclaimer than by anything I read in (the student's) complaint,"

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and suggesting that Tuttle "would be happier in a sectarian classroom."

Tuttle said Brown then reduced his teaching load to one course and announced that he would subject Tuttle to classroom monitoring by a fellow professor before reaching a decision on whether to fire him.

Brown, reached by phone Thursday, declined comment, referring UPI to the office of college President Morris W. Beverage.

On Friday Beverage said that Tuttle was not asked to hide his religious identity in teaching ethics. "In fact, we have a Catholic nun and a rabbi teaching this class. The assertion by FIRE that it was about his religious beliefs is not true."

What, then, was it about?

Beverage replied that he could not answer because "fortunately from his (Tuttle's) perspective, the position of the college is never to discuss personnel matters. ... It has to do with his teaching of the ethics class," the president said.

"Let me add that he was offered three classes for our current semester in logic, which is the maximum load for a part-timer, and he declined to teach those. ... All I know is our responsibility is to our students."

Why would it have been undesirable for the students for Tuttle to continue to teach the sorts of classes he had been teaching?

"That starts to get into performance issues and student issues relative to performance," Beverage replied, "and that is a personnel matter."

Tuttle, 40, said he has worked at Lakeland for more than four years and loves the school, the students and the faculty, but he feels he is being treated unfairly. He rejected the three logic classes because "it was not my interest."

Tuttle said he is very fair to the students. "I love dissentation and debate," he told UPI. "I expect students to be who they are. They don't have to veil themselves. I don't need to veil myself. I'd rather be up-front with people because stealthing doesn't work."

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